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ABSTRACT

The study of language arts is too large a topic for both elementary pupil and teacher, while the study of language skills--reading, writing, speaking, listening--is feasible. However, two main hurdles to teaching language skills well are the separation of reading as a lone subject and the ignoring of speaking and listening skills in many curricula. Although reading instruction eventually develops into literature study, listening must be taught intentionally, not incidentally, and persuasive speaking is necessary in involving the listener. The teaching of writing skills should also begin in the primary grades, as should the rudiments of logical thinking. Textbook language programs can be sequenced to provide increasingly demanding reading experiences and wider language skills study. In addition, textbook programs should include valid performance objectives and evaluation. Textbook publishers, editors, and authors bear the greatest burden of providing superior language arts programs for the final consumer, the pupil. (JM)

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The Elementary Pupil as Textbook Consumer

We all have little games we play to convince kids that school is important. One of the favorite tricks is to say that school is real, like life itself. This game is often played in textbooks, especially in language arts textbooks. We people who work in language arts labor under other people's misconception that our chosen field is a hodge-podge of unrelated unrealities. This makes us defensive at times, but we should, instead, leap to the offense. Language is not removed from life: language is life. And like life, it is full of duty, full of sound and fury. It is always changing and yet ever the same. Language is our dream and our incurable disease.

Teaching language is hard and demanding. To twist a speech from Dickens, "Teaching language can be one demd horrid grind." Conversely, it can be rewarding and uplifting. Language arts is too much--and at the same time--too little. It is all of communication, nonverbal as well as verbal. It begins with basic skills like handwriting and spelling and capitalization, and expands to encompass the whole of linguistics--phonology, morphology, dialectology, all that mysterious band of ologies. It encompasses words and sentence, rhymes and sonnets, books and newspapers, radio and TV, and all that pervasive band of media. It runs the gamut from the meaningful meaninglessness of "Good morning, how are you?" to the meaningless doublespeak of every government's gobbledygook. It's that internal machine that we can't turn off, even when we're asleep.

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No net seems wide enough to pin language arts down for an answer to the question "What do I do on Monday morning?" The study of language looks like too big a bite to be swallowed along with new math, new science, and new social studies, and then to be regurgitated by a teacher who also must perform as evaluator, umpire, bookkeeper, money-changer, watchdog, zipper-upper, and all-around good guy or good gal.

What counts? My heresy, as a textbook editor, holds that language arts is indeed too huge and amorphous a study for the elementary teacher and the elementary pupil. But language skills is not. Language skills are usually divided into four areas: reading, writing, speaking, listening. Since language grows and changes and winds back on itself, any breakdown of the skills can be deceptive. No language skill can be truly isolated. We read writing and we write reading; we listen to speakers and we speak to listeners. Our earliest experiences with reading come from listening to someone speak words written by yet another someone.

I see two main hurdles to teaching language skills successfully. First, the separation of reading as a lone subject. Emphasis on reading skills is not wrong by any standard: literacy is the sole foundation of the structured knowledge required to live in the world today. But removal of reading from the language arts curriculum kicks one leg out from under the chair, leaving the three remaining legs tottering.

Even worse, in many curriculums the skills of speaking and listening--especially listening--are ignored or paid only lip service. In part, this treatment results from misinterpreting the linguistic discovery that children come to school capable of using and understanding complicated sentence structures. As Paul Roberts wrote, somewhat defensively perhaps, "When we present the grammar of a language to people who already speak the language,

we run into a very serious initial problem."

Because results have fallen below the expectations aroused by Roberts and other linguists, many educators proclaim that teaching syntactic structure not only wastes school time but even warps young minds.

The anti-scientific attitude has led, in some schools, to an abandonment of organized efforts to teach the skills of speaking and listening. Instead, many teach language as a series of what they call learning experiences. This experiential philosophy compares to a football philosophy that if you carry the ball often enough you will run up a season's total of 2,000 yards, or to a baseball philosophy that if you swing the bat enough times you will hit 715 home runs.

The fact that all children speak and listen does not mean they are automatically O.J. Simpsons of speech or Henry Aarons of listening. Listening appears more difficult to teach than speaking does. Teachers sometimes complain that children just won't listen. And children sometimes complain that teachers just don't listen. Listening takes more than an ear and a brain. Listening is a skill demanding the desire to know, patience, submergence of ego, uncritical acceptance of the strengths and shortcomings of others, and the ability to synthesize new bits of intelligence sometimes in conflict with long-held and deep-felt beliefs.

Listening cannot be taught incidentally; it must be taught intentionally. We might take our byword here from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who began his most famous poem with the words "Listen, my children, and you shall hear...."

Speaking is the flipside of listening. Despite the truism that God gave us two ears and but one mouth, a lot more talking goes on than listening. Much of the fault lies with us talkers, who, all too often, are talking to ourselves, for ourselves, and of ourselves. We should teach young speakers audience

awareness. To be heard--really heard--you must involve your listener. The successful conversationalist, the persuasive speaker, constantly asks himself not "What's in it for me?" but "What's in it for him?" "What's in it for her?" "What's in it for them?"

Although children come to school with some ability to speak and listen, they come unable to read and write. From the beginning, the school must develop these skills. Teaching reading has generated much concern, but teaching writing is not only more difficult; it may be more important.

Writing, a skill built of many skills, demands coordination and concentration of mental faculties. This skill cuts across all the learning domains--cognitive, psychomotor, and affective. From the prosaic essentials of handwriting, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, writing moves to the high cerebration that results in Joyce Carol Oates' fiction, Robert Frost's poetry, and Shakespeare's drama.

Obviously, there is not a Frost or an Oates in every first grade class nor a Shakespeare in every school. No one claims that the right teaching of the right materials will generate genius. Still, we need not resign ourselves to generating only mediocrity.

Our first task begins in the primary grades: early and careful attention to the basic skills of manuscript and cursory handwriting, sound/letter regularities, recognition and replication of "sight words," all the mechanical skills without which the higher skills aren't worth peanuts.

At the same time children should be learning the rudiments of logic, or thinking skills: categorizing, sequencing, analyzing, synthesizing, conceptualizing, and developing analogies from sensory experiences. Setting five-year-olds to work fitting blocks of different shapes into matching holes doesn't seem like much, but it may--it just may--help to prevent them as

adults from trying to fit square pegs into round holes.

A recent journal article discussed the prevalence of the so-called "fourth-grade slump," a phenomenon often noted and deplored. Why do so many kids at that level turn off their curiosity and their creativity? It may be that fourth grade is a watershed of learning, especially in the language arts. Children should by then have mastered the basic language skills. Fourth graders without these skills find themselves behind their classmates and behind their own felt expectations; and, worst of all, they don't know why. Semi-literate and baffled, they slip further behind every day. "Social promotion" only increases their ineptitude and frustration.

Assuming that children have mastered the mechanics of writing by the end of Grade three, what can we do to help them continue their advance toward linguistic maturity? We know the futility of simply dishing out more of the same. We can, if we carefully avoid the notion that doing is learning, provide for them occasions to write and to make their writing experiences valuable to themselves and to others. We can teach them to respect their own efforts and to want to produce writing of greater maturity. Many teachers have found that children, given the time and the reason, will improve their own writing and each other's writing so that the teacher deals not with a pile of first drafts, but with a selection of final drafts.

We can sequence our language programs so that children will be continually exposed to better and more demanding reading experiences, wider and more thought-provoking language study. Kids, on their own, play with words and work with words. Whether we incorporate their language interest into our textbooks and into their classwork, they are--if only in

hit-or-miss fashion--aware of the power of semantics, the ring of the right word, the pleasure of rhyme and alliteration, the pervasiveness of metaphor. A pupil will know that "Hammering Henry" signifies Henry Aaron. The pupil may, without analyzing the figure being used, apply the same epithet to Henry Kissinger--metaphor and alliteration on one tether and leading to new insight.

We can even improve pupils' ability to write more maturely by sequencing transformational grammar insights. We know that this has already been done--by Hunt, O'Donnell, O'Hare, Cooper, and others. The method, called sentence combining, employs almost none of the linguistic and mathematic apparatus used in those abortive efforts at creating a nation of little linguists. We know without scientific proof that sixth graders, on the average, write better sentences and tighter paragraphs than fourth graders, and that professionals write more maturely than high school students. By analyzing examples of writing at various levels, linguists have discovered that in addition to the expected semantic, or content, differences, there are syntactic differences that also typify the various levels of writing and, further, that these syntactic structures can be arranged in a hierarchy and taught in a sequence. The transformational grammar comes into sentence combining as the source of these sentence structures. In sentence combining, pupils work with only a model and sets of sentences that they combine following that model. As they master increasingly complex models, they meld sentences into paragraphs and take apart other paragraphs to recover the base sentences. Pupils carry these new sentence structures over to their own writing so that--for example--fourth graders use structures they would not normally use until sixth grade; and similar dramatic gains follow all up the line. These gains are not pious projections but results observed

scientifically.

Of the four skill areas, I have skirted reading. Earlier I mentioned one reason for this skirting: reading generally has its own spot in the curriculum. Nevertheless, reading is a language skill and cannot be avoided in language arts textbooks. Even the most traditional composition and grammar series contain bits of professional poetry and prose, both as models and as springboards for discussion.

We must bow to reality and accept that reading is a separate subject, and will continue to be so for some time. Beyond the teaching of basic skills, however, reading melds into the general area of language study. Somewhere along the line reading skills become "thinking" skills and reading arts become literature, a well-accepted leg of the NCTE tripod of composition, language study, and literature. The NCTE applied this tripod more to secondary than to elementary grades, but who can say where reading ends and literature begins? Since most of us acknowledge literature as the highest expression of language, a language program without literary selections is like a man without a head--or, if that metaphor seems too hyperbolic, a piano without a keyboard.

Before I conclude, I'd like to say a few words on performance objectives, evaluation, and testing. Like you, I sometimes wish these concerns would take wing and fly away. They seem antithetical to the classic picture of education as Mark Hopkins on one end of the log and the student on the other.

Of course these concerns will not go away--and, in truth, they should not. The notions behind performance objectives and evaluation--that we should know where we want to go and if we have arrived--can't be denied. Half of the states already have legislation requiring evaluation. So, even if we do try to deny it, we are whistling into the wind. This situation demands much

from all of us in school work, from publishers as well as from teachers. We who prepare textbook programs must, in light of this new interest, provide valid objectives and evaluation. This concern will be reflected in most future language arts series.

There will still be open classrooms and teachers who do not want--and are not bound by--a rigid structure of objectives and evaluation. Naturally, publishers will continue to provide programs for these teachers. Some schools are also into non-grading and non-testing, but these trends run counter to the demands by lay people as well as educators for objectives and evaluation. These demands, arising both within and outside the profession, result from the twin phenomena of universities turning away our graduates as unable to handle college work and of employers turning them down as unqualified. We see national attention focused on the case of the City of San Francisco being sued by a high school graduate whose fifth-grade reading level has prevented him from getting a decent job.

Students, their parents, and communities no longer accept the notion that school is a place to keep kids off the street rather than a place to educate them. I doubt if they ever did accept the notion, any more than you as teachers did; but now they have become vocal in their protests against non-education. These protests may create short-term problems, but in the long run they can only improve our schools, making them better places for learning and for teaching.

Most series featuring objectives will also incorporate a testing program meshing with performance objectives, wherever these objectives are testable. Language arts teachers--more, perhaps, than other teachers--deal with many objectives that are not readily broken down into learning bits for teaching and testing. It is difficult--if not impossible--to observe and

test affective domain objectives like developing appreciations and attitudes. This does not mean that we should not state these as objectives, but only that we should distinguish between objectives that are immediately testable and those that are not. Whatever textbook publishers do and state officials say, the problems remain essentially local and will be solved on the local level.

What can the elementary language arts teacher do, bombarded with new curriculums in this and other areas and with shifting and every more demanding standards?

We can start by looking at what teachers are doing now. Most teachers are following a textbook program. Recent figures indicate that over 90% of classroom programs are taught from a basic text, with or without supplementary materials of various kinds. Textbook publishers don't object to that, of course. Teachers--especially in elementary schools--have not the time to do otherwise. The burden, therefore, is on publishers, editors, and authors of textbooks. Most textbook authors, incidentally, are school people like yourselves, generally the most thoughtful and hard-working school people, leaders in our profession.

All teachers have the right to influence the choice of textbooks and they have the duty to examine all available programs to find what is best for their own pupils. If you find your program inferior, complain. Gripe to every administrative person who will lend as ear. Write to publishers and tell them what's wrong with their books. Publishers not only listen and react; they almost always answer letters from users. Meanwhile, even under your terrifying time pressures, supplement any program with materials from other programs, from periodicals and other media sources, from other teachers, from your own head. The teacher is her own--or his own--best friend and chief resource. The pupils as a textbook consumer relies on the most significant medium of all--the alert, responsible, and responsive teacher.